

Idaho Charter School Study Plan

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Overview

The year 2008 marks the 10th anniversary of the passage of the Public Charter School Law in Idaho. Currently there are a total of 30 charter schools (including four virtual charter schools) in Idaho serving 10,993 K-12 students, with approximately 6,981 students on the wait list.

The Idaho Department of Education, in partnership with the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), is planning a statewide landmark study on the growth and quality of charter schools over the past 10 years. The results of this study will be used to guide statewide charter school planning for the next 10 years.

An advisory committee was formed to guide the study (members of this committee are in the Appendix). To define the scope and key questions of the study, a conference call was arranged by Shirley Rau, School Choice Coordinator, Division of Innovation and Choice, State Department of Education, on August 13, 2007. Members of the advisory committee participating in the conference call were asked to share their views on the following questions:

1. What do we already know about charter schools in Idaho at this point?
2. What do we need to know to reflect on the growth and quality of charter schools in Idaho over the past 10 years?
3. What key questions do we want to address in this study?
4. What data sources do we need to explore to address these questions?

In the weeks following the conference call with advisory committee members, Shirley Rau conducted a series of conference calls with Idaho Charter School Leadership Council members. The council was formed in May 2007 with members from Northern, Southwestern, and Southeastern Idaho. Members of the council are heads and board chairs of charter schools. They were asked to respond to the same set of the questions listed above.

Three themes emerged from the conference calls with the advisory committee and Charter School Leadership Council: quality of charter schools, policy issues relating to charter schools, and the effects of charter schools on traditional schools.

The Quality of Charter Schools was defined as the extent to which students, parents, and teachers are satisfied with various aspects of charter schools, especially with regard

to learning conditions, student engagement in these schools, and student academic performance. Learning conditions refer to the extent to which instruction and support make success seem feasible, lessons show connections to real life, lessons are interesting and enjoyable, teachers are both supportive and demanding, and peers are supportive with each other. Engaged students generally feel trusting, safe, and welcome in school; behave cooperatively and abide by school rules; aim to learn as much as they can without worrying whether peers think they are smart or not; work diligently and remain resilient in response to setbacks; and achieve satisfaction and a sense of efficacy based on efforts and progress. The quality of charter schools is also related to the school culture that promotes excellence and parent involvement.

Policy Issues Relating to Charter Schools refers to Idaho laws, policy regulations, and procedures at the state, authorizer, district, and school levels that affect charter schools in Idaho.

Effects of Charter Schools on Traditional Schools refers to the transferability of some best practices from charter schools to traditional schools.

Given the budget allocated for this study, the Idaho Department of Education and NWREL have decided to focus on examining the quality of charter schools and identifying the challenges and needs of charter schools in relation to certain policies and regulations at state and district levels. The following is a plan for the study with this focus.

Key Questions for the Study

This study seeks to address the following questions:

- How do the students served by Idaho charter schools compared to those served by traditional schools in Idaho?
- What are key reasons students choose to attend or leave charter schools?
- What are students' and their parents' experiences with charter schools?
- What are teachers' experiences with charter schools?
- How innovative are charter schools in meeting students' needs?
- How did students in charter schools perform academically in comparison with those in traditional schools over the past five years, as indicated by scores on Idaho statewide assessments?
- What are the barriers and facilitators of charter school operations with regard to policies and regulations at the state, district, and school levels?

Data Collection

Data for this study will be collected from charter school students, their parents, teachers, and principals/heads of charter schools. In addition to existing data such as student demographics and their scores on Idaho statewide assessment, most data for this study will be collected via surveys of students, parents, teachers, and charter school principals.

Student Demographic Information: Charter school students will be compared with non-charter school students by grade level, gender, ethnicity, reduced/free lunch status, and special education status. Due to major differences between brick-and-mortar charter schools and virtual charter schools, students from virtual charter schools will be analyzed separately. The purpose of the comparison is to assess the diversity of students enrolled in Idaho charter schools.

Student Survey: An online survey will be developed for seventh to 12th graders enrolled in Idaho charter schools (the survey will be written at a sixth- to seventh-grade reading level, so it is appropriate to exclude sixth-grade and younger students from this survey). In addition to assessing reasons for entering and leaving charter schools, the survey will also explore students' views of learning conditions and their levels of engagement in their charter schools.

Parent Surveys: An online parent survey will be developed for parents whose children are currently enrolled in charter schools. Questions included in the parent survey will be compatible with those included in the student survey.

Teacher Survey: An online survey will be developed for charter school teachers with questions compatible with those on the student and parent surveys. In addition, teachers will be asked about their satisfaction with working in charter schools as compared to their previous working experience, their opinions about curricula used in their charter schools, and their assessment of staff development needs.

Charter School Principal Survey: An online survey will be developed for principals/heads of all charter schools. The survey will be 1) to assess the quality of their schools, including the qualification of staff members, curricula used, NCLB (No Child Left Behind) requirement status, and innovative ways of meeting students' needs; 2) to obtain their feedback on various policies/regulations at the district and state level, and their views of various policies in their schools; and 3) to identify staff development needs and support they need from their sponsoring school districts and state.

Due to the current budget for this study, the surveys will be administered only to brick-and-mortar charter schools. The uniqueness of virtual charter schools merits a separate study in the future with a new set of surveys for students, teachers, principals and parents.

Follow-Up Telephone Conference Calls with Charter School Principals: Based on the survey data collected from charter school principals, follow-up conference calls will be conducted with charter school principals to clarify and interpret the survey data and discuss recommendations for addressing issues identified via the survey. There will be a

total of four conferences calls set up by the Idaho Department of Education; each conference call will include no more than six to seven principals. NWREL will facilitate and record the conference calls.

Student Academic Performance Data and No Child Left Behind Status: Charter school students' scores on Idaho statewide assessment tests will be compared with non-charter school students' scores in the state by grade level, gender, ethnicity, reduced/free lunch status, and special education status. The academic performance data of virtual charter schools will be analyzed separately. The comparison will be conducted year by year horizontally and longitudinally over the past five years. Charter schools selected for this comparison should be in existence for at least five years. All the charter schools will be examined for their status relating to No Child Left Behind requirements.

Brief History of Charter Schools in Idaho

To provide a context for this study, a brief history of charter schools will be provided, including public charter school laws, the approval process for new charter schools, the structure of leadership for charter schools, the structure of support for charter developers and charter operators, and the growth of charter schools over the past 10 years.

Timeline

The following is the timeline of the study, with study activities, who will be responsible, and completion date for each activity.

Study Activities	Responsible	Completed by
Finalize the study plan	IDE/NWREL*	12/15/07
Signing contract with NWREL	IDE/NWREL	12/31/07
Developing survey instruments	NWREL/IDE	1/31/08
Field test the survey instruments	NWREL/IDE	2/28/08
Directions for student demographic information analysis	NWREL	2/28/08
Directions for statewide assessment data analysis	NWREL	2/28/08
Administer the surveys	NWREL /IDE	3/31/08
Set up follow-up conference calls with charter school principals	IDE	4/16/08
Follow-up conference calls	IDE/NWREL	5/18/08
Student demographic analysis	IDE	5/18/08
Student assessment data analysis	IDE	5/18/08
Brief history of charter schools in Idaho	IDE/NWREL	5/18/08
Draft study report	NWREL	7/30/08
Review of the draft report	IDE	8/30/08
Final study report	NWREL	9/30/08

*IDE = Idaho Department of Education. NWREL = Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The organization that is listed first serves as lead organization for the corresponding study activity.

APPENDIX

Idaho Charter School Study Advisory Committee Members

Tom Luna, State Superintendent of Education

Shirley Rau, School Choice Coordinator, Idaho State Department of Education

Luci Willits, Chief of Staff, State Department of Education

Tamara Baysinger, Charter Schools program manager, Public Charter School Commission

Ken Burgess, Coalition of Idaho Charter School Families

Representative Bob Nonini, Idaho Legislature, Head of House Education Committee

Commissioner Paul Powell, Idaho Public Charter School Commission

Rob Sauer, Deputy Superintendent, SDE Division of Innovation and Choice

Kerri Pickett Hoffman, Idaho Virtual Academy, Education Director

Senator John Goedde, Idaho Legislature, Head of the Senate Education Committee